

The Deserving and the Undeserving

Determinants of Welfare Attitudes

1 Deservingness as “Heuristics” or “Automatism”?

Countless studies have highlighted the crucial role of public opinion in formulating, discussing, and implementing social policy. Political actors have regularly quoted public opinion or sentiment to justify reforms, most frequently retrenchments, of the welfare state. These measures were deemed necessary to comply with “novel” concepts of distributional justice or to explain the recess or the conditionality of present social protections. Given the significance of these discussions and reforms, social scientists have produced a wide range of explanations for the drivers and dynamics of welfare attitudes. Previous work has established that an individual’s support for social transfers is likely affected by subject-related factors such as material self-interest and general or policy-specific political preferences. Other contributions have highlighted the additional effects of context-level predictors, most notably captured by crucial economic or social indicators or different institutional architectures of the welfare states.¹

On the one hand, welfare attitudes are driven by the interests, preferences and values of those who pay taxes, contribute to social welfare systems, and ultimately support or

1 Cf. Beramendi, Pablo/Rehm, Philipp: Who Gives, Who Gains? Progressivity and Preferences, in: *Comparative Political Studies* 49/4 (2016), pp. 529–563; Bobo, Lawrence: Social Responsibility, Individualism, and Redistributive Policies, in: *Sociological Forum* 6/1 (1991), pp. 71–92; Hasenfeld, Yeheskel/Rafferty, Jane A.: The Determinants of Public Attitudes Toward the Welfare State, in: *Social Forces* 67/4 (1989), pp. 1027–1048; Blekesaune, Morten/Quadagno, Jill: Public Attitudes Toward Welfare State Policies. A Comparative Analysis of 24 Nations, in: *European Sociological Review* 19/5 (2003), pp. 415–427; Esping-Andersen, Gosta: *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge 1990; Groskind, Fred: Ideological Influences on Public Support for Assistance to Poor Families, in: *Social Work* 39/1 (1994), pp. 81–89; Hall, Peter A./Soskice, David (eds.): *Varieties of Capitalism. The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, Oxford 2001; Margalit, Yotam: Explaining Social Policy Preferences. Evidence from the Great Recession, in: *American Political Science Review* 107/1 (2013), pp. 80–103; Rehm, Philipp: Risks and Redistribution. An Individual-Level Analysis, in: *Comparative Political Studies* 42/7 (2009), pp. 855–881; Rehm, Philipp: Social Policy by Popular Demand, in: *World Politics* 63/2 (2011), pp. 271–299; Rehm, Philipp: *Risk Inequality and Welfare States. Social Policy Preferences, Development, and Dynamics*, Cambridge 2016; Rueda, David/Pontusson, Jonas: *Individual Preferences for Redistribution in Western Europe. Self-Interest, Political Articulation, Altruism and Identity*. University of Oxford, Oxford 2010.

reject general or specific social transfers. Moreover, welfare attitudes are also impaired by the attribution, evaluations, judgments, and prejudice concerning diverse groups of (genuine, framed, or stylized) benefit claimants. Individual-specific interests and values are not easily changed. However, the diffusion of stereotypes and pejorative frames of benefit claimants may be an alternative, more feasible strategy to manipulate public opinion and pave the way for new rounds of social benefit cuts, welfare state retrenchments, or conditionality. Recent scientific analyses have picked up the multidimensional nature of welfare attitudes and highlighted object- instead of subject-related determinants of welfare attitudes. Under the broad label “deservingness”, social scientists have explored whether alternative, well-defined individuals are considered deserving or undeserving of social support or transfers.²

These attributions of deservingness are informed by dimensions such as personal employment history (or the lack thereof), the reciprocity of contributions and benefit claims (or the lack thereof), or identity-based notions that determine whether an individual can identify with an unemployed person or not. Empirical studies have corroborated that individuals support social transfers to claimants they consider “unlucky,” while they often reject similar efforts for those they consider “lazy”. For instance, a middle-aged woman who loses her job due to the bankruptcy of her employer is assumed to be regarded as more deserving than a young unemployed man who quits a job because he does not like it.³

1.1 Deservingness as Heuristics or an Automatic Process

Standard views have suggested that voters who are not sufficiently informed or do not hold well-structured preferences may rely on deservingness as “heuristics” or “judgmental shortcuts”. These cues enable actors to form coherent opinions without substan-

2 Cf., above all, the seminal paper by Oorschot, Wim van: Who Should Get What, and Why? On Deservingness Criteria and the Conditionality of Solidarity Among the Public, in: *Policy & Politics* 28/1 (2000), pp. 33–48.

3 Cf. Buss, Christopher: Public Opinion to Targeted Labour Market Policies. A Vignette Study on the Perceived Deservingness of the Unemployed, in: *Journal of European Social Policy* 29/2 (2019), pp. 228–240; Gilens, Martin: *Why Americans Hate Welfare. Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, Chicago 2000; Oorschot, Who Should Get What, 2000; Naumann, Elias et al.: Public Support for Sanctioning Older Unemployed. A Survey Experiment in 21 European Countries, in: *European Societies* 22/1 (2019), pp. 1–24; Petersen, Michael Bang: Social Welfare as Small-Scale Help. Evolutionary Psychology and the Deservingness Heuristic, in: *American Journal of Political Science* 56/1 (2012), pp. 1–16. Petersen, Michael Bang et al.: Deservingness Versus Values in Public Opinion on Welfare. The Automaticity of the Deservingness Heuristic, in: *European Journal of Political Research* 50/1 (2011), pp. 24–52; Sniderman, Paul M./Brody, Richard A./Tetlock, Philip E.: *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*, Cambridge 1991.

tive political knowledge or well-established preferences.⁴ Heuristics may replace substantive policy information and may be utilized as “the next best thing to fully rational democratic decision-making”.⁵

Many of these considerations have been developed for and applied to electoral research. Numerous authors have transferred these concepts to research on welfare attitudes and suggested that the evaluation and understanding of the deservingness concept are closely associated with and structured by value-based notions and might provide meaningful and valuable judgmental shortcuts.⁶

In the past years, a series of contributions by Michael Bang Petersen and his co-authors have contested the established understanding of deservingness as heuristics and judgmental shortcuts.⁷ Instead, the authors characterize reactions to deservingness as an “automatic” process instead of a “heuristic” tool. These cues are thus supposed to operate independently of substantive knowledge or individual sophistication levels. Even more so, automatic reactions to deservingness cues weaken or substitute the impact of preference- and value-based judgments based on both informed and uninformed individuals.⁸ Deservingness cues are supposed to operate automatically. Judgments are derived rapidly, without substantial political knowledge or effort, and unconnected with individual values or preferences.⁹ These effects are supposed to be embedded with evolutionary history and psychology or are even thought to be determined by “genetics”.¹⁰

1.2 Preparing and Reviewing an Experimental Testbed

Whether welfare attitudes are driven by individual preferences and values or the deservingness and framing of stereotypical benefit claimants is of direct political interest. The value-based sentiment is comparatively stable over time, and most people are neither persuaded easily nor quickly. In contrast, attributions of deservingness may

4 Cf., in more general terms, Sniderman/Brody/Tetlock 1991.

5 Druckman, James N./Kuklinski, James H./Sigelman, Lee: The Unmet Potential of Interdisciplinary Research. *Political Psychological Approaches to Voting and Public Opinion*, in: *Political Behavior* 31/4 (2009), pp. 485–510, here p. 9.

6 Gilens 2000; Larsen, Christian Albrekt: The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes, Burlington 2006; Oorschot, Wim van: Why Pay for Welfare? A Sociological Analysis of Reasons for Welfare Solidarity, in: *The Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences* 36/1 (2000), pp. 15–36.

7 Petersen et al. 2011; Petersen 2012; Jensen, Carsten/Petersen, Michael Bang: The Deservingness Heuristic and the Politics of Health Care. *Deservingness and Health Care*, in: *American Journal of Political Science* 61/1 (2017), pp. 68–83.

8 Petersen et al. 2011.

9 Cf. Petersen et al. 2011; Petersen 2012 and, more generally, Gigerenzer, Gerd/Todd, Peter M.: *Simple Heuristics That Make Us Smart*, Oxford 2000.

10 Petersen 2012.

be an easier target for political campaigning and targeted messages. The exposure to favorable or unfavorable framing of benefit claimants may considerably impact welfare attitudes held by most citizens.

The supposed stability of political values and the potential volatility of deservingness cues also impact the conceptual and methodological research strategies. The analysis of relatively static preferences and values generally utilizes observational data contributed by conventional mass-level surveys. These approaches facilitate a comprehensive and multidimensional view. However, explaining one set of values or preferences with another set of values or preferences is theoretically not very attractive and methodologically open to all possible kinds of endogeneity, collider, and confounder bias. In contrast, the provision of alternative frames produces a more dynamic impact, which targets and modifies deservingness perceptions. These experimental treatments are quickly addressed by factorial surveys and the presentation of alternative vignettes that allow for some more straightforward manipulation and identification of causal effects. Stable preferences and values are most often analyzed by conventional means. Deservingness cues are more easily manipulated and better suited for modern tools of causal inferences such as field, laboratory, or survey experiments.¹¹

We need to address several interrelated aspects to explore the wide-ranging claims of proponents of the deservingness perspective. Focusing on a randomized controlled trial (RCT), we establish whether deservingness attributions, as measured by diverse survey vignettes, exert a meaningful and sizable impact on welfare state attitudes. Second, addressing the alleged “automaticity” of deservingness, we check whether these effects are stable across diverse individuals, different situations, and heterogeneous contexts. Ultimately, we explore whether attributions of deservingness effectively invalidate and overwrite value-based judgments.¹²

Our study addresses a crucial gap in the published record and sheds additional light on the robustness of deservingness cues across heterogeneous economies, welfare states, and institutional contexts. To the best of our knowledge, this article utilizes the largest survey experiment on deservingness that has been organized so far. The welfare state module has been embedded with the European Social Survey (Round 8, fieldwork in 2016/17). The substantive focus of this contribution lies within the field of active labor market policies and the inclination to apply sanctions to unemployed persons for rejecting a job offer for several reasons. Below the line, the dataset covers more than

11 Cf. Druckman, James N. et al.: *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*, Cambridge 2011; Druckman, James N./Green, Donald P.: *Advances in Experimental Political Science*, Cambridge 2021; Morton, Rebecca B./Williams, Kenneth C.: *Experimental Political Science and the Study of Causality. From Nature to the Lab*, Cambridge 2010.

12 Cf. Petersen et al. 2011; Petersen 2012.

44,000 respondents sampled from the diverse contexts of 23 European countries. Each of these respondents is assigned one of four treatment vignettes and inquired about evaluating likely sanctions in three different scenarios so that the dataset includes almost 125,000 attributions of deservingness.

The descriptive and causal inferences laid out in this paper demonstrate the efficacy of deservingness cues based on this large and heterogeneous sample. Everything else being equal, different characterizations of unemployed benefit claimants exert a systematic impact on the propensity to impose (ever more rigid) sanctions in active labor market policies. Our statistical models show that the different vignettes have very similar effects across diverse, stylized situations in our survey instruments and heterogeneous economic, social, and institutional contexts at the country level. However, the findings of the survey experiment also refer to a stable but limited effect of deservingness cues. Characterizations of alternative benefit claimants impact our outcome variable, but this impact is often very close to zero and substantively not relevant within several country segments. Moreover, applying multilevel statistical models shows that the baseline likelihood to impose whatever sanction differs considerably across alternative country contexts. This context-level heterogeneity refutes accounts of “automatic,” even “genetic” deservingness effects.

2 A Factorial Survey and Observational Controls

The conditionality of social benefits and the considerations of the deservingness of transfer recipients have always featured prominently in political and public discussions of the welfare state. This is especially true for unemployment compensation, which has been introduced later than the other branches of social security since effectively all instances of unemployment have long been considered results of character faults or laziness.

More recent studies in the diverse fields of political science, psychology, and sociology have argued that individuals effectively apply deservingness cues as a fast mode of information processing and rapid opinion formation. Instead of individual knowledge and preferences, simple cues and heuristics are supposed to account for public opinion concerning welfare states in general,¹³ more specific evaluations of social security programs,¹⁴ and judgments about individuals within these programs.¹⁵ Building on

¹³ Gilens 2000.

¹⁴ Larsen 2006, Larsen, Christian Albrekt: The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes. How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support, in: *Comparative Political Studies* 41/2 (2007), pp. 145–68; Oorschot, *Who Should Get What*, 2000.

¹⁵ Petersen et al. 2011.

these previous theoretical and empirical insights, the imminent literature attempts to identify specific deservingness criteria. The concept is partitioned into five alternative or reinforcing dimensions: control, need, identity, attitude, and reciprocity.¹⁶

2.1 Addressing deservingness by a Factorial Survey

A survey experiment embedded with Round 8 of the “European Social Survey” (hereafter: ESS) provides empirical evidence that is necessary and sufficient to tackle these complex issues. The surveys consist of both the main questionnaire and supplemental rotating modules. Round 8 of the ESS (fieldwork in 2016/17) reiterates a module on “Welfare Attitudes in a Changing Europe. Solidarities under Pressure”. Designed by a multi-national team led by Wim van Oorschot and Bart Meuleman, the rotating module addresses attitudes toward the welfare state, their conditionality, and the readiness to impose sanctions on unemployed benefit claimants who “misbehave” in one of three different ways: they either do not accept job offers due to low payment or low qualification requirements, or they reject to carry out unpaid community work in exchange for the receipt of social transfers.

The novel iteration of the module on welfare state attitudes fielded in the ESS-8 also adds an experimental component to the design. Generally, survey experiments combine the merits of causal stringency in a controlled, randomized experiment with sufficiently large sample sizes to allow for valid and reliable causal and statistical inferences. Specifically, the factorial survey focuses on the effects of different attributes of unemployed individuals seeking social transfers on the willingness to impose sanctions when they turn down a job offer. The encompassing design of the survey experiment and the rich data involved also allow us to explore the interactions of treatment effects with observational controls and the conditioning effects of national socioeconomic and institutional contexts. These design features enable us to simultaneously claim internal and external validity.¹⁷

In each of the twenty-three parallel survey modules, respondents have been randomly assigned to four different subsamples. Each subsample has been provided with a separate survey vignette characterizing an unemployed person looking for work. Given

16 Cf. the seminal paper by Oorschot, *Who Should Get What*, 2000 and the more recent contributions Buss 2019; Fossati, Flavia: *Who Wants Demanding Active Labour Market Policies? Public Attitudes to Policies That Put Pressure on the Unemployed*, in: *Journal of Social Policy* 47/1 (2018), pp. 77–97.

17 Cf. for additional details Auspurg, Katrin/Hinz, Thomas: *Factorial Survey Experiments*, Thousand Oaks 2014; Steiner, Peter M./Atzmüller, Christiane/Su, Dan: *Designing Valid and Reliable Vignette Experiments for Survey Research. A Case Study on the Fair Gender Income Gap*, in: *Journal of Methods and Measurement in the Social Sciences* 7/2 (2017), pp. 52–94.

that most parallel survey segments include 1,500 to 2,000 respondents, the randomized assignment procedure creates causally stringent, rich experimental evidence on deservingness attributions and the willingness to employ sanctions on claimants who appear unworthy of support. Throughout the text, we will label different treatments by T and index the four different vignettes by:

- T₁: Imagine someone aged twenty to twenty-five who is unemployed and looking for work. This person was previously working but lost their job and is now receiving unemployment benefits.
- T₂: Imagine someone who is unemployed and looking for work. This person was previously working but lost their job and is now receiving unemployment benefits.
- T₃: Imagine someone in their fifties who is unemployed and looking for work. This person was previously working but lost their job and is now receiving unemployment benefits.
- T₄: Imagine a single parent with a three-year-old child who is unemployed and looking for work. This person was previously working but lost their job and is now receiving unemployment benefits.

These characteristics of diverse claimants can easily be linked to the five dimensions of the deservingness concept laid out by Oorschot.¹⁸ Predominantly, the vignettes vary the age of the benefit claimant with an unspecified baseline category (T₂), a younger (T₁) and an older unemployed person (T₃). The contrast between younger and older claimants alludes to dimensions such as “control” or “reciprocity.” The fourth treatment does not entirely fit in this design. Still, it characterizes a single parent, i.e., someone who may likely be considered younger than average, who may probably be imagined as female, and who takes care of a three-year-old child (T₄). This final vignette stresses the dimensions “control” and “need.”

This paper utilizes the survey experiment embedded in the ESS-8 in a secondary analysis. The data at hand provides the largest survey experiment on “deservingness”. The ESS is well-known to contribute high-quality data. Nevertheless, from our perspective, the data has some limitations. Unfortunately, the somewhat restrictive set of vignettes included in the questionnaires does not systematically address and vary a complete set of deservingness criteria which, primarily provided a large number of interviewees, could be adequately captured by a conjoint experiment. Ultimately, the vignette deck offers only a little systematic leverage to explore the “attitude” or the “identity” dimensions. Since the ESS-8 questionnaires were arranged considerable time

¹⁸ Oorschot, *Why Pay For Welfare*, 2000.

ahead of the fieldwork, the survey experiments, as fielded in 2016 and 2017, for instance, do not enable us to draw inferences concerning a migrant or refugee background of benefit claimants.¹⁹

Throughout the subsequent analysis, we utilize the vaguely defined vignette merely characterizing “someone” (T_2) as our reference category. We posit that “someone aged twenty to twenty-five” (T_1) will be, on average, considered less deserving than the baseline due to deficiencies in the control, need, and reciprocity dimensions. Conversely, an older benefit claimant “in their fifties” (T_3) should be doing better than the baseline concerning the control and reciprocity dimensions. The last treatment moves beyond these age-related features and introduces a “single parent with a three-year-old child” (T_4). At the same time, this individual will most likely be comparatively young, care and custody of a minor impact on the control and need dimensions and render the benefit claimant most deserving. Therefore, we hypothesize that the deservingness order will be $T_1 < T_2 < T_3 < T_4$.

While an RCT assigns the characteristics of alternative benefit claimants, each respondent is inquired to consider likely sanctions across a series of three related situations. Throughout the text, we will label and index different scenarios or situations by $\$$ and $k \in \{1,2,3\}$:

S_1 : (...) they turn down a job because it pays a lot less than they earned previously?

S_2 : (...) they turn down a job because it needs a much lower level of education than the person has?

S_3 : (...) they refuse to regularly carry out unpaid work in the area where they live in return for unemployment benefit?

Theoretically, we have little leverage to suggest how these scenarios impact the respondents’ readiness to sanction unemployed benefit claimants. We cannot theoretically derive meaningful hypotheses on whether turning down job offers due to salary or qualification reasons will be considered more “punishable”. While the third scenario does not provide a straightforward exit from unemployment, we also lack theoretical knowledge to hypothesize how the rejection of community work will be considered compared to the first two scenarios. Therefore, our focus on these stylized scenarios will be more exploitative than deductive, and we will utilize these scenarios as consistency and robustness checks.

¹⁹ But cf. Buss 2019; Reeskens, Tim/van der Meer, Tom: The Inevitable Deservingness Gap. A Study into the Insurmountable Immigrant Penalty in Perceived Welfare Deservingness, in: *Journal of European Social Policy* 29/2 (2019), pp. 166–81.

In the empirical analysis, we assess how the randomly assigned treatment vignettes (T) across different scenarios (S) impact the attribution of deservingness within diverse political and socioeconomic settings (C). The previous literature has utilized several alternative measures to flesh out this concept. For instance, the seminal contribution by Oorschot²⁰ applies a generosity scale ranging from one to ten. Buss²¹ inquires survey respondents to set an appropriate level of unemployment benefits (in Euro). The survey experiment by Reeskens and van der Meer²² suggests some categories with pre-defined replacement rates, and, in yet another survey experiment, Petersen et al.²³ ask Danish interviewees whether “activation requirements” should be tightened on a five-point Likert scale.

The survey experiment does not only evaluate the general deservingness attributed to randomly assigned types of benefit claimants that most likely differ in their attributed deservingness. In addition, the outcome variables assess whether these unemployed individuals should be sanctioned when they reject a job offer for insufficient income or qualification levels or refuse to carry out regular, unpaid community work in exchange for social transfers. The presence and the level of imposed sanctions are measured on an ordered dimension which ranges from keeping all benefits (O_1) via the partial loss of benefits (O_2 and O_3) to losing all benefits (O_4):

- O_1 : This person [$T_1 \dots, T_4$] (in situation [S_1, S_2, S_3]) should be able to keep all their unemployment benefit.
- O_2 : This person [$T_1 \dots, T_4$] (in situation [S_1, S_2, S_3]) should lose a small part of their unemployment benefit.
- O_3 : This person [$T_1 \dots, T_4$] (in situation [S_1, S_2, S_3]) should lose half of their unemployment benefit.
- O_4 : This person [$T_1 \dots, T_4$] (in situation [S_1, S_2, S_3]) should lose all their unemployment benefit.

2.2 Bringing in Subject-Specific Controls

Proceeding with our argument, we turn from vignette treatments to observational controls. Successful randomization per se does not require the systematic specification of further controls. However, their incorporation enables us to compare the consequences of deservingness treatments with more conventional concepts established in the imminent literature. Including observational controls also allows us to arrive at

²⁰ Oorschot, *Who Should Get What*, 2000.

²¹ Buss 2019.

²² Reeskens/van der Meer 2019.

²³ Petersen et al. 2011.

more precise estimates of treatment effects. These modeling choices enable us to focus on the conditionality of deservingness cues by analyzing the interaction of vignette effects and individual-specific predictors.

2.2.1 Impacts of Socioeconomic Backgrounds and Individual Self-Interest

Predictors related to socioeconomic backgrounds and material self-interest are among the key explanatory factors in current research on welfare attitudes. Solely relying on observational data, the isolation and weighing of their specific impact is often a (too) demanding task, and social background does neither necessarily reflect selfish instead of sociotropic motives, nor is it exogenous to ideological stances and policy-specific commitments.²⁴

Income

Key contributions have consistently demonstrated that income almost always hurts support for social redistribution or transfers. High-income groups need to contribute much more to social welfare programs than less affluent citizens but are less likely ever to be recipients of social transfers. Moreover, affluent citizens are also less likely to interact with poorer people and often unable to understand or identify with the specific needs of less affluent strata of the respective society.²⁵ The ESS-8 includes sufficient information to capture each respondent's total income and break it down into income deciles.

Risk and Risk Exposure

Another closely related dimension of material self-interest concerns (perceived) exposure to labor market risk. Respondents with a previous unemployment history, who had to rely on social transfers in the past, are more likely to support encompassing, generous, and unconditional social transfers. Likewise, individuals who think they

²⁴ Cf. Hasenfeld/Rafferty 1989; Blekesaune/Quadagno 2003; Groskind 1994; Margalit 2013; Rehm 2009, Rehm 2011, Rehm 2016; Rueda/Pontusson 2010; Bobo 1991.

²⁵ Beramendi/Rehm 2016; Hasenfeld/Rafferty 1989; Svallfors, Stefan: Worlds of Welfare and Attitudes to Redistribution. A Comparison of Eight Western Nations, in: *European Sociological Review* 13/3 (1997), pp. 283–304; Svallfors, Stefan: Class, Attitudes and the Welfare State. Sweden in Comparative Perspective, in: *Social Policy & Administration* 38/2 (2004), pp. 119–38. Svallfors, Stefan/Kulin, Joakim /Schnabel, Annette: Age, Class, and Attitudes Toward Government Responsibilities, in: Svallfors, Stefan (Hg.): *Contested Welfare States. Welfare Attitudes in Europe and Beyond*, Stanford 2012, pp. 159–192.

might lose their job and thus subjectively believe they might be reliant on social transfers in the future tend to support social solid protections and are less likely to impose severe sanctions on the unemployed. Beyond egocentric self-interest, perceived risk exposure also enables individuals to identify with benefit claimants.²⁶ The ESS-8 captures actual unemployment (experiences) by two dummy variables indicating whether a respondent is currently unemployed or was previously unemployed. In addition, another survey item records subjective unemployment risk on a four-point Likert scale ranging from one (“not at all likely”) to four (“very likely”).

2.2.2 Impacts of Ideological Preferences

Both general ideological stances and more specific policy preferences are closely linked to the social features of the respondents and their objective or subjective material self-interest. While ideological standings partly reflect objective socioeconomic backgrounds, political socialization, risk attitudes and exposure, or the influence of private and political networks, these effects never automatically and deterministically carry over to the formation of general and specific political preferences.

General Ideology

Respondents on the political left are also supposed to prefer more rigorously regulated labor markets and the provision of encompassing and total unemployment compensation. Adversely, economic conservatives likely consider the provision of generous unemployment schemes an obstacle to the effectiveness of free-market allocation, while social conservatives might be additionally concerned about the deservingness of unemployment benefit claimants and alleged moral hazard.²⁷ The ESS-8 assesses general ideological orientations by a unidimensional, eleven-point left-right scale ranging from zero (“left”) to ten (“right”).

26 Oorschot, Wim van/Meuleman, Bart: Welfare Performance and Welfare Support, in: Svallfors, Stefan (ed.): *Contested Welfare States. Welfare Attitudes in Europe and Beyond*, Stanford 2012, pp. 25–57; Rehm 2009; Rehm 2011; Rehm 2016; Svallfors/Kulin/Schnabel 2012.

27 Andrefß, Hans-Jürgen/Heien, Thorsten: Four Worlds of Welfare State Attitudes? A Comparison of Germany, Norway, and the United States, in: *European Sociological Review* 1/4 (2001), pp. 337–356; Bobo 1991; Blekesaune/Quadagno 2003; Feldman, Stanley/Steenbergen, Marco R.: The Humanitarian Foundation of Public Support for Social Welfare, in: *American Journal of Political Science* 45/3 (2001), pp. 658–677; Gërkhani, Klarita/Koster, Ferry: ‘I Am Not Alone’. Understanding Public Support for the Welfare State, in: *International Sociology* 27/6 (2012), pp. 768–787; Hasenfeld/Rafferty 1989.

Specific Welfare Attitudes

This broad group of indicators is closely embedded with social backgrounds, material self-interest, and general ideological preferences. It addresses expected drawbacks of (extensive) social protection, for instance, substantial financial burdens on other individuals or businesses, the likely weakening of communitarian subsistence networks within a society, or even the emergence and downright commendation of widespread “laziness”.²⁸ However, alternative perspectives specifically highlight the role of social welfare in the emergence and conservation of social cohesion and equality or underscore its role in the fight against poverty. The ESS-8 covers a wide range of policy-specific statements. Responses are measured on five-point scales and range from one (“agree strongly”), two (“agree”), three (“neither/nor”) to four (“disagree”) and five (“disagree strongly”). Substantively, the statements address whether social benefits or services (1) cost businesses too much, (2) lead to an equal society, (3) make people lazy, (4) make people less willing to care for one another, (5) prevent widespread poverty, or (6) place too great a strain on the economy.

2.2.3 Impact of Demographic Features

Conceptual and theoretical approaches have emphasized the role of age and gender for inclinations concerning the scope of social transfers, its conditionality, and preferences for cuts or extensions to specific social security programs. The ESS-8 questionnaires address a range of demographic properties. We have selected two dimensions that have also been highlighted by previous research on welfare attitudes: women have been consistently considered more likely to favor redistributive politics and social transfers. We introduce a binary dummy variable that indicates whether a respondent is female.²⁹ Moreover, previous research has shown that welfare state attitudes held by older respondents may not only be more rigid but also react to different criteria that especially allude to the reciprocity dimension. Our age indicator is divided into four categories from 15–29, 30–44, 45–65, and over 65 years.

2.2.4 Country-Level Context

From a similar, theoretically elaborate, and sophisticated perspective, several notable contributions have emphasized the significance of objective labor market risk and sub-

²⁸ Gilens 2000.

²⁹ Cf. Larsen 2007.

jective risk perceptions.³⁰ Unemployment insurances do not merely redistribute income, but the correlation between economic disadvantage (low income) and economic insecurity (high risk) matters for welfare state support. Generally, unemployment insurances imply redistribution from employed to unemployed individuals and involve transfers from those who pay more to those who pay less or nothing. At the individual level, support for unemployment compensation thus increases with individually perceived unemployment risk but decreases with income.

Rehm³¹ indicates that this logic also implies a macro-level argument: societal support for encompassing unemployment is assumed to increase if labor market risk is evenly distributed so that a larger share of people/respondents is likely to be dependent on social transfers. At the systemic level, we capture the risk of unemployment by a battery of indicators, i.e., the gross domestic product, the current unemployment rate, social expenditures, replacement rates in unemployment insurance, and an index of protection against (unfair) dismissal.

In another influential account, Rueda and Stegmueller³² have published some partly complementary, partly alternative explanations of welfare state attitudes from multi-level perspectives. The arguments reinforce the roles of (expected) income, material self-interest, and security concerns. In our analyses, these effects are supposed to be moderated by social and economic inequality and societal heterogeneity.

The collaborative, multi-national structure of the ESS provides an almost ideal testbed to explore the context-dependent effects of deservingness cues. The country-specific iterations of the ESS-8 comprise roughly 1,500 to 2,000 raw respondents, ranging from Iceland (with $N = 880$) to Germany (with $N = 2,852$). Collectively, the ESS-8 dataset covers a total of $N = 44,387$ respondents from European countries with diverse socioeconomic contexts, welfare state regimes, and general institutional contexts: Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Each of these respondents is asked to suggest appropriate sanctions for three scenarios S_1 , S_2 and S_3 so that we may rely on more than 120,000 evaluations of individual-, object-, situation-, and country-specific attributions of deservingness.

³⁰ Rehm 2009; Rehm 2011; Rehm 2016.

³¹ Rehm 2016.

³² Rueda, David/Stegmueller, Daniel: *Who Wants What? Redistribution Preferences in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge 2019.

3 Effects of Deservingness Cues

We now proceed from conceptual and theoretical foundations to presenting empirical findings derived from the experimental and observational data provided by the European Social Survey. Methodologically, we introduce and justify an appropriate statistical model and estimation strategy to address the critical concerns of this paper. In more substantive terms, our approach is designed to address the three leading questions of our analysis straightforwardly: We begin by demonstrating the presence, robustness, and magnitude of the multivalued treatment effects (T) emerging from our set of four vignettes across the three situational items (S) and the 23 parallel national survey segments covered by the ESS-8. Secondly, we consider our observational background/control variables to arrive at more precise statistical estimates and to explore further the robustness of our findings across different (groups of) survey respondents. Thirdly, we extend our model to also consider national-level controls which capture stable institutional contexts and the dynamics of macroeconomic indicators to account for contextual differences among the different national contexts.

3.1 Data Structures and Statistical Models

The above discussion illustrates that the setup for the empirical data analysis is necessarily quite complex. The outcome O is a categorical variable that characterizes a series of graded sanctions, which each respondent suggests whenever a person that claims unemployment compensation turns down a job offer due to lower payment (S_1) or qualification (S_2) or is unwilling to carry out unpaid community work in return for their social benefit (S_3). Therefore, the outcome variable O will be modeled as an ordinal-scale variable with four distinct, ordered categories ranging from O_1 to O_4 , i. e., from no to maximum sanctions.

Our key explanatory variable is given the perceived deservingness of a benefit claimant, which is characterized by a series of three randomly assigned treatments (T) that focus on their age (T_1 and T_3) and family status (T_4). Some of the models presented below also include a set of theoretically derived individual-level controls (X) which, as lined out and justified before, address material self-interest, general and specific ideological orientations, and the respondents' basic demographic and social features.

Besides the specification and definition of our outcome, treatment, and control variables, we need to comment on and explain the complex structure of the dataset. Consider that each of our $N = 44,387$ respondents is assigned one specific vignette (T) but is asked to evaluate this vignette across the set of three situational items (S) laid out in the questionnaires. The data is therefore characterized by a hierarchical

structure. Situations are nested within individuals, and individuals are, in turn, nested within the country-level survey segments. We model these hierarchical effects and the implied contextual heterogeneity by introducing random intercepts at the individual and the country level. The parameters on the vignette treatments (T) and the three situational items (S) potentially differ across these contexts and are thus specified as crossed random slopes. This implies that we allow for variation of the vignette effects and the situational items across our 23 survey segments to evaluate and compare their country-specific effects and consequences.

Ordinal data may be conveniently modeled by “cumulative link models”³³. In our case, we focus on an ordinal, four-point Likert scale with items ranging from “should keep” (O_1) to “should lose all benefits” (O_4). The cumulative model implies that the observed categorical values O are functions of an unobserved, continuous variable \bar{O} , which substantively resembles a latent propensity to impose graded sanctions. In turn, the categorization of the latent variable is, with four scale points, achieved by $N - 1 = 3$ thresholds τ_c . Therefore, the probability of selecting sanction level c is given by

$$\Pr(O = c) = F(\tau_c) - F(\tau_{c-1})$$

In the next step, we model the continuous latent variable \bar{O} by a linear predictor η that includes the vignette treatments T, the situational items (S), and sets of individual-level observational controls:

$$\bar{O} = \eta + \varepsilon = \theta T + \alpha S + \beta X + \varepsilon$$

Wrapping up, the probability that an individual selects one of the four sanction categories is given by

$$\Pr(O = c) = \Phi[\tau_{c[i,l]} - (\theta T + \alpha S + \beta X)] - \Phi[\tau_{(c-1)} - (\alpha S + \theta T + \beta X)]$$

The final step of our model involves the consideration of the complex, layered data structure described above. Recall that throughout the text, we index individuals by i , vignette treatments by j , situational items by k , and country- or survey-level context by l . Further, addressing an ordinal variable with four categories, the (three) cut-offs T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 are the equivalent of random intercepts and can vary at the individual and country levels. In addition, we specify crossed random slopes at the treatment and situational levels:

33 Agresti, Alan: *Categorical Data Analysis*, New York 2019.

$$\Pr(O = c) = \Phi[\tau_{c(i,i)} - (\alpha_1S + \theta_1T + \beta X)] - \Phi[\tau_{(c-1)(i,i)} - (\theta_1T + \alpha_1S + \beta X)]$$

3.2 Describing a Complex Dataset

We begin the presentation of empirical evidence with some simple descriptive statistics to explain the structure of the complex ESS-8 survey experiment and dataset. The brief descriptive statistics presented below focuses on differences in the proposed level of preferred/suggested sanctions that varies among vignettes (T), situations (S), and countries. Notably, the factorial survey does not address deservingness per se. However, it concentrates on (the level of) sanctions to be imposed on individuals who currently receive unemployment benefits and turn down a job offer due to either lower wages, due to lower qualification levels, or refuse to carry out unpaid community work in exchange for social transfers. Provisionally ignoring treatments (T), situations (S), and country contexts (C), we find that 27.4 percent of all respondents suggest that an individual should “lose all benefits”, 31.7 percent believe they should “lose half of their benefits”, and 19.7 or, respectively, 21.2 percent think the individual should “lose only a small part” or “keep all their benefits”.

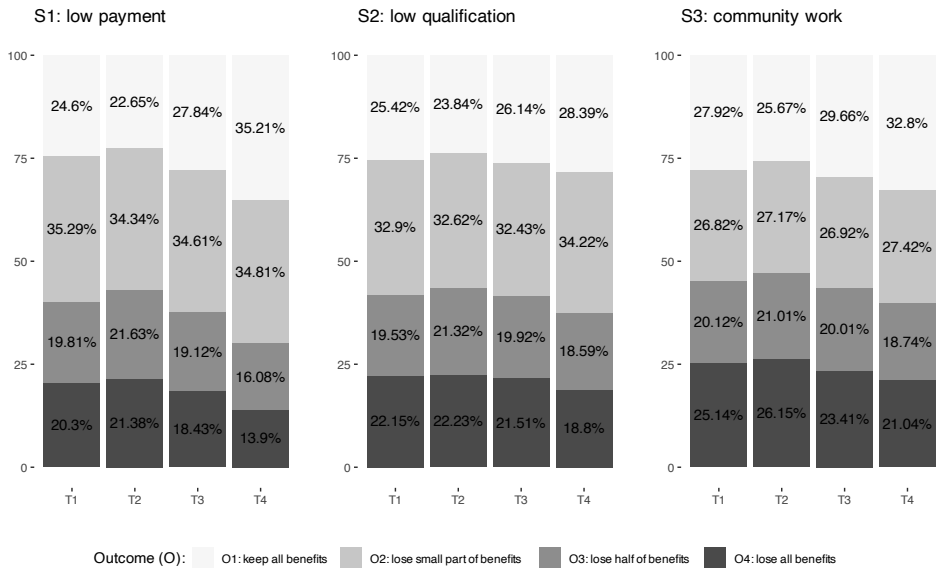


Figure 1 : Characterizations of multivalued treatment effects
 Notes: Outcomes (O) by treatment (T) and situational context (S). In this Figure, the effects of country contexts are ignored.

Figure 1 addresses the randomly assigned vignettes T that each represents a hypothetical benefit claimant and confirms the impact of assigned treatments on the promulgation of sanctions. Due to the successful randomization of these multivalued treatments (RCT), we may evaluate the impact of T as a direct causal effect. Ignoring country-level contexts for the time being, more than 21 percent of the respondents are ready to withdraw any welfare state transfer from a young unemployed in their early twenties when they declines a job offer due to low pay. Vice versa, less than fourteen percent are ready to impose similar sanctions on a single parent. Likewise, while only 23 percent of the subjects who have been assigned a vignette characterizing a “young” benefit claimant are willing to pass on any cuts, more than 35 percent of those who have been shown a “single parent” are ready to do so.

Proceeding to the second layer of our dataset, we immediately learn that these treatment effects are remarkably robust across several different situations (S). In any of the three scenarios, voters are, with reference to the baseline “unemployed person” (T_2), more likely to impose sanctions on “young” benefit claimants (T_1) who might be considered deficient concerning the attitude, reciprocity, and need dimensions of the deservingness concept. Conversely, “older” benefit claimants (T_3) and “single parents” tend to be sanctioned less frequently and less severely when they reject job offers due to low payment (S_1) or qualification levels () or refuse to do unpaid community work (S_3). In each of these situations, the “hierarchy” of benefit claimants is strictly preserved and corresponds to our theoretical expectations ($T_1 < T_2 < T_3 < T_4$).

Notwithstanding, the situational contexts differ a bit in terms of the general readiness to sanction deviant behavior and the effect size that may be ascribed to the RCT. When someone rejects a job offer due to low payment (S_1), the randomly assigned treatments make a comparatively large difference. However, when a job offer is turned down because of too few educational requirements (S_2), the discriminatory effect of alternative treatments is considerably lower. Eventually, the rejection of unpaid community work assumes an intermediate position (S_3). We find moderate to strong associations across the situations S_1 , S_2 and S_3 . Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient ranges from $\rho(S_1, S_3) = 0.46$ up to $\rho(S_1, S_3) = 0.68$. Among the more than 40,000 respondents, roughly 34 percent of the subjects suggested equivalent sanction levels regardless of whether someone rejected job offers due to financial or qualification issues or was unwilling to carry out community work.

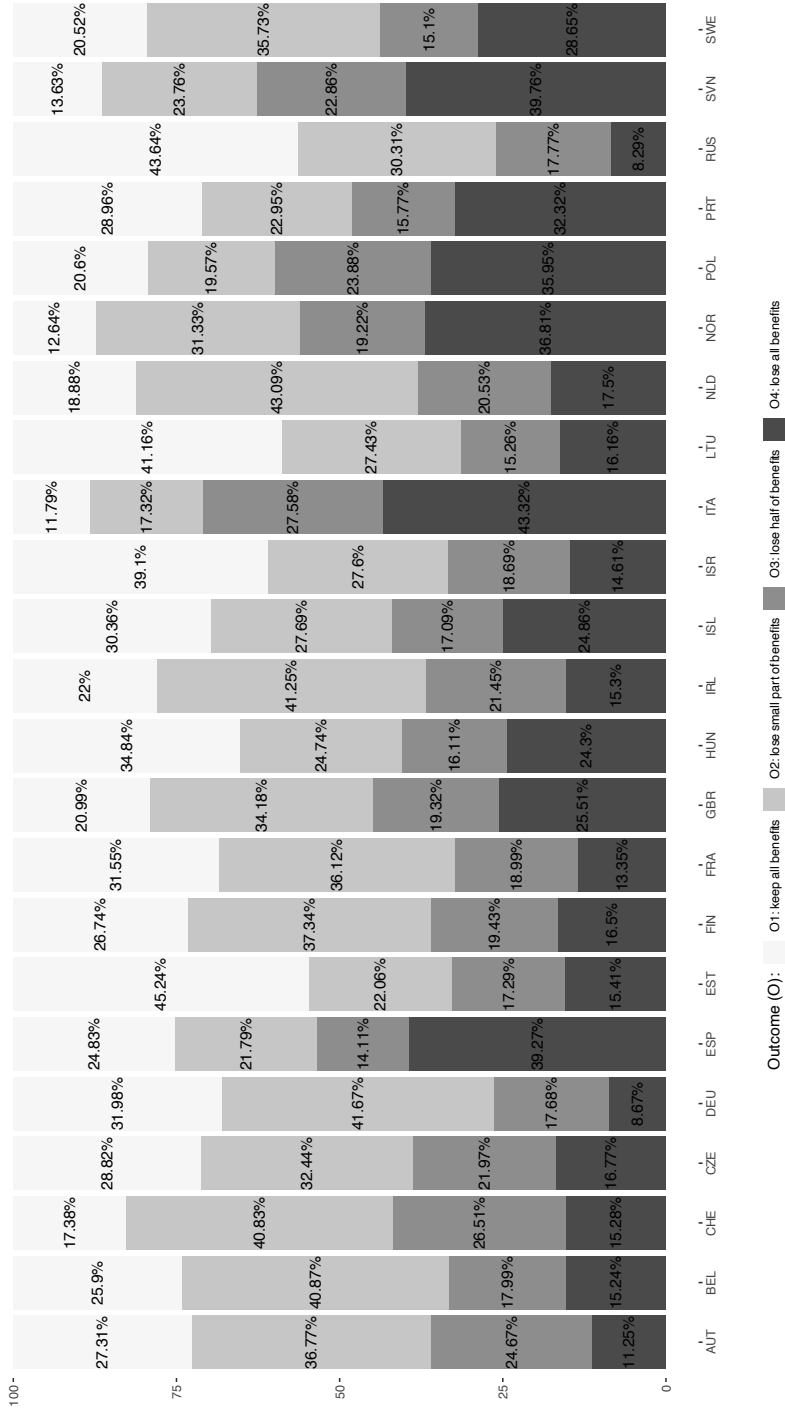


Figure 2: Suggested sanction levels per country
 Notes: Outcomes (O) by treatment (T) and country context. In this Figure, the effects of situational contexts (S) are ignored.

Thirdly, Figure 2 underscores the profound consequences of country-level context. Even a superficial inspection of the stacked bar charts demonstrates that the aggregate suggested sanction levels differ considerably from one survey segment or national context to another. In some countries covered by the ESS-8, e.g., in Italy, Norway, Poland, Spain, or Slovenia, survey respondents on average suggest harsh sanctions against allegedly non-compliant transfer claimants. In contrast, respondents from other countries prefer milder and/or more nuanced sanctions imposed on similarly characterized individuals, most visibly in Germany or Russia. Below the line, the simple descriptive evidence refers to considerable heterogeneity across various European countries, but these differences cannot easily be attributed to common context-level predictors such as varieties of capitalism or critical macroeconomic indicators.

3.3 Randomized Multivalued Treatment Effects

We continue the presentation and discussion of the core survey experiment(s) by focusing on the effect of the multivalued treatment (T) within simple, bivariate perspectives. Each country-specific ESS segment includes sufficiently many individual respondents to allow for successful randomization. Therefore, simple bivariate associations among the (grade of) sanctions the respondent considers appropriate and justified and the multivalued treatment, i.e., the specific vignette they were presented, are supposed to yield unbiased estimates of the coefficients and/or treatment effects. Our statistical models match our key theoretical research questions and conceptual approaches: we model the ordinal outcome variable O by cumulative link models which impose random intercepts/cut-offs and random slopes on the treatment variable (T) at the country-level (C). To confirm the empirical consistency and robustness of our findings, we have chosen to run separate multilevel models for the three scenarios S_1 , S_2 and S_3 .

Figure 3 characterizes the perceived deservingness of specific groups of claimants by the rigidity of suggested sanctions. The panels provide ample, complete, and almost exhaustive information on the RCT and summarize the ordered logit regression coefficients for each multivalued treatment (T), across the three different scenarios at hand (S), and within 23 European countries covered by the ESS-8. The panels summarize multilevel ordered logit models which, to check consistency and empirical robustness, have been run separately for each of the three scenarios S_1 , S_2 and S_3 . The dependent variable is the suggested sanction O , and the single independent variable is the treatment T with the vaguely specified vignette T_2 as a reference category. The models have been estimated by R/Stan. We have run four chains and saved 2,000 iterations for statistical inference. The hierarchical cumulative link models pass

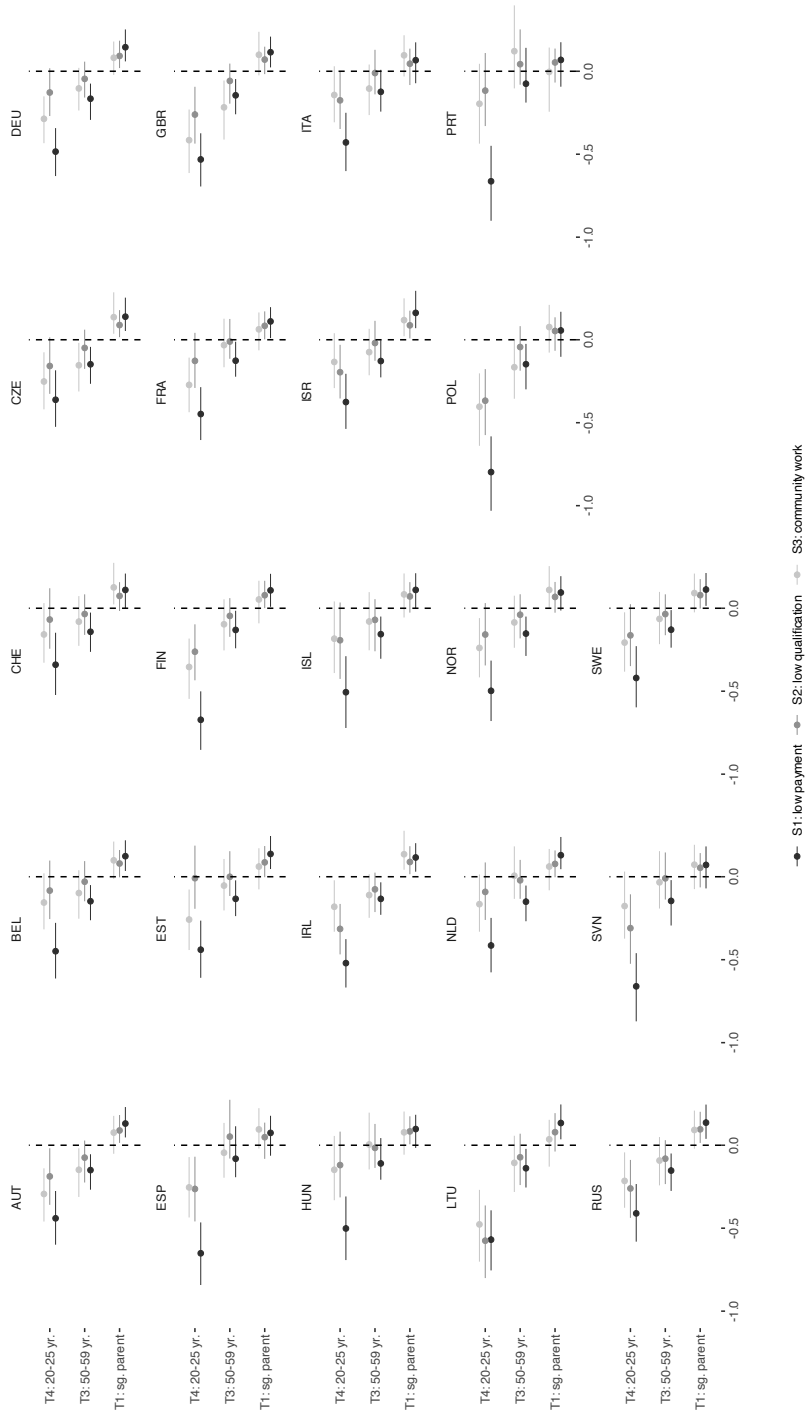


Figure 3: Job offer turned down due to lower salary, due to lower qualification, or refusal to carry out unpaid community work

Notes: The coefficient plots summarize the regression coefficients on the vignette treatments **T** in a series of three multilevel linear models, which were separately run for S_1 , S_2 , and S_3 . Throughout, we apply T_2 as a reference category, while T_1 , T_3 and T_4 are binary treatment indicators. The dots display the obtained regression coefficients **OT**, which may be assessed as effect size indicators. The horizontal lines represent a 95 % Bayesian HPD interval.

all conventional diagnostics such as the Geweke and Heidelberger-Welch tests of non-stationarity.³⁴

Notwithstanding, we hasten to add that raw coefficients from a nonlinear model do not provide precise and valid quantifications of causal effects. However, odds ratios or predicted probabilities for any stylized configuration of independent variables do not contribute that information either. Likewise, the coefficients and the associated Bayesian HPD do not address the general level of preferred and suggested sanctions within a country. However, a comparison of country-specific coefficients exclusively showcases the difference made by the treatment effects. Throughout our descriptive and causal analyses, we have selected the vaguely defined vignette “an unemployed person” (T_2) as our reference category, and the obtained coefficients α on the three binary treatment variables T assess departures from the reference category. Since the outcome variable O ranges from no sanctions to the loss of all benefits, negative coefficient values refer to less rigid sanctions than the baseline category. Positive coefficients, in contrast, indicate that the sanctioning of a specific vignette group becomes more rigid.

The empirical findings generally confirm fundamental theoretical notions and empirical insights derived from deservingness cues laid out above.³⁵ Across the board, randomly assigned treatment vignettes tend to exert a strong and substantively meaningful impact to the willingness of the respondents to impose sanctions. Within each of the twenty-three parallel survey modules, respondents are least likely to impose severe sanctions on single parents who reject a job offer or refuse to do community service. Secondly, most respondents also shy away from imposing too harsh sanctions on older unemployed who turn down job offers due to lower payment or qualification requirements. Thirdly, and almost across the board, respondents are, in comparison to the vague reference category, more willing to sanction younger benefit claimants in their early twenties. These attitudes correspond to several dimensions included in the theoretical concept of deservingness, for instance the control, need and reciprocity criteria.³⁶

Below the line, the general likelihood that benefit claimants are considered less deserving and thus more at risk of being sanctioned in case of alleged non-compliance therefore, as hypothesized, is arranged in the order $T_1 < T_2 < T_3 < T_4$. This generic ranking can clearly be identified in all but two segments of the ESS-8 factorial survey. Only in Portugal and Spain, the two countries which were most severely plagued by youth unemployment, respondents were, on average, willing to impose stricter sanctions on older than on younger benefit claimants. Likewise, these country-level differences

34 Cf., instead of many others Gelman, Andrew et al.: *Bayesian Data Analysis*, Boca Raton 2013.

35 Oorschot, *Who Should Get What*, 2000; Petersen 2012.

36 Cf. Oorschot, *Who Should Get What*, 2000.

reflect the control dimension of the deservingness concept. With excessive levels of group-specific unemployment at the macro level, younger people are considered much less in control of their employment status.

The survey experiment thus yields clear and strikingly robust findings concerning deservingness attributions to different groups of benefit claimants which are characterized by the randomly assigned vignettes. However, many of these effects are measured with considerable uncertainty and, although there are sufficiently many respondents, do not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance within each survey module. In addition, both the general rigidity of sanctions and the specific impact of the randomly assigned treatment vignettes varies considerably from one country to another.

4 Effects on Deservingness Cues: Automatic or Heuristic?

The previous analyses have cogently demonstrated the effectiveness of vignettes that characterize divergent attributions of deservingness in an RCT. This section aims at advancing to more encompassing, fully specified models of welfare attitudes which consider both object-specific deservingness judgments, as attached to the randomly assigned treatments, and subject-specific preferences that impact an individual's inclination to sanction "deviant" behavior of benefit claimants. With these basics in mind, we proceed to illustrate some closely linked aspects of deservingness: Initially, by converting the outcome variable to a metric scale, we aim to obtain more directly interpretable and relevant quantities of interest, and to explore the stability of these causal treatment effects across different individuals, situations, and country segments. Our empirical findings reveal that deservingness cues, as specified in the ESS-8, exert a stable, but substantively limited impact on deservingness considerations in the field of social welfare. Secondly, the rich data at hand demonstrate that the provision of treatment vignettes does not phase out explanations built on self-interest, personal values, ideological, or political preferences. Ultimately, in the third step, we highlight that characterizations of deservingness function generally and automatically across diverse individuals and settings. Attributions of deservingness are therefore not systematically changed by individual- or context-level controls and thus operate independent of individual or country-specific context.

With randomly assigned vignettes, the multivalued treatment effects may per se be assessed without bias. Nevertheless, the inclusion of observational controls, i.e., the insertion of controls for observed respondent characteristics, potentially leads to more precise estimates of treatment effects and enables us to consider interactions among vignette treatments (T) and individual-level observational controls (X).

Note that the outcome O , as specified in the ESS questionnaires, is an ordinal variable with higher categories describing more rigid sanctions. As demonstrated above, ordered categorical variables require the application of non-linear statistical techniques such as cumulative link models which prevent the straightforward identification of causal effects and thus often render the substantive interpretation and comparison of alternative predictors complex and inconsistent. To facilitate an interpretation of treatment effects and observational controls, we apply a transformation to our outcome variable O which enables us to apply simpler linear modeling strategies. Evidently, to “keep all benefits” implies a loss of $O'_1 = 0$ percent of the social transfers, to “lose half of their unemployment benefits” implies a loss of $O'_3 = 50$ percent, and to “lose all their unemployment benefits” corresponds to losing $O'_4 = 100$ percent of social transfers; moreover, we equate “losing a small part of their unemployment benefit” with a reduction by $O'_2 = 25$ percent. Of course, we hasten to add that this tweak permits for predicted values of suggested sanctions that do not match the exact categories in the questionnaires or may even lie outside of the scale range from zero to one hundred percent loss of unemployment benefits. Nevertheless, the introduction of a linear modeling framework will vastly alleviate the substantive interpretation and comparisons of our findings using diverse predictor variables and across heterogeneous country contexts.

The alternative measurement approach results in a somewhat easier statistical model that addresses the metric outcome variable O' instead of the original O . Considering the structured dataset at hand, our multilevel linear model may be written as

$$O'_{i,j,k,l} \sim N(\zeta_{j,k,l} + \theta_{j,k,l}T + \alpha S + \beta X_i, \sigma_{O'}^2) \forall i = 1, \dots, I$$

$$\begin{pmatrix} \zeta_{j,k,l} \\ \theta_{j,k,l} \end{pmatrix} \sim \begin{pmatrix} \zeta_j & \sigma_\zeta^2 & \rho\sigma_\zeta\sigma_\theta \\ \theta_j & \rho\sigma_\zeta\sigma_\theta & \sigma_\theta^2 \end{pmatrix} \forall j = 1, \dots, J$$

Note that we index the four different treatments T by $j \in \{1, \dots, 23\}$, the different scenarios or situations S by $k \in \{1,2,3\}$, and the heterogeneous country contexts by $l \in \{1, \dots, 23\}$. The predictor matrix X labels predictors at the individual level. The above notation thus implies that we capture the expected loss of social benefits O' by an individual-, situation, and country-specific intercept, a matrix of random coefficients $\theta_{j,l}$ for the treatment effects, and another matrix of random coefficients for the diverse scenarios $\alpha_{k,l}$. The model is completed by the introduction of individual-specific controls, which are captured by the coefficient vector β .

With these caveats in mind, the transformed, metric outcome variable O' (instead of the previous O) facilitates a much more straightforward interpretation of the treatment effects. This is particularly true for comparative inferences on the magnitude of treatment effects across scenarios and countries.

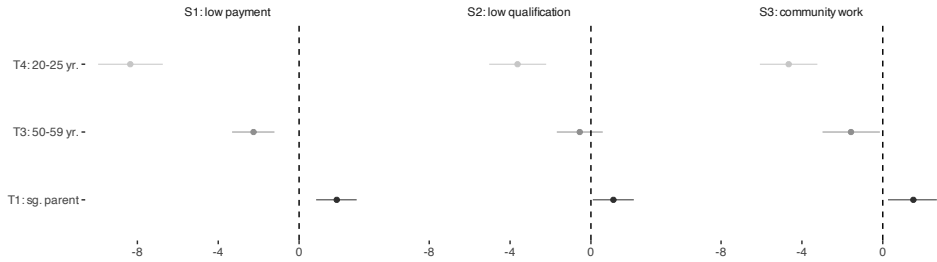


Figure 4: Job offer turned down due to lower salary, due to lower qualification, or refusal to carry out unpaid community work

Notes: The coefficient plots summarize the regression coefficients on the vignette treatments **T** in a series of three multilevel linear models, which were separately run for S_1 , S_2 , and S_3 . Throughout, we apply T_2 as a reference category, while T_1 , T_3 and T_4 are binary treatment indicators. The dots display the obtained regression coefficients **OT**, which may be assessed as effect size indicators. The horizontal lines represent a 95 % Bayesian HPD interval.

Figure 4 displays predictions of estimated (mean) sanctions and thus replicates the treatment effects in the RCT. Across the three situations S_1 , S_2 and S_3 , and across the three separately specified multilevel linear models, younger benefit claimants are sanctioned more severely than the vaguely defined baseline category. In contrast, older unemployed and, especially, unemployed single parents are sanctioned less severely.

While these patterns are, again, reproducible, robust, and stable, the effect sizes are limited and not too consequential in applied, practical politics. The scenario “low payment” (S_1) is linked with the most significant differential of treatment effects. Older benefit claimants are supposed to lose 2.25 percent less, younger benefit claimants, on average, forfeit 1.87 percent more than the baseline category. While the effects of age are thus stable, but also limited in magnitude³⁷, interviewees are much more clement when single parents reject job offers due to low payment. Compared with the reference category, the presentation of the vignette “single parent with three-year-old child” on average abates (average) sanctions by 8.35 percent. Findings from our multilevel Bayesian model also highlight significant heterogeneity of the random intercept and the treatment effects across diverse country context. For instance, in Israel sanctions imposed on single parents are about five percent below the reference; in Poland, this difference amounts to almost 15 percent.

For the remaining two scenarios (S_2 and S_3), effect sizes are considerably smaller: young benefit claimants who reject a job offer due to low qualification requirements lose about one percent more, older about 0.5 percent less than the baseline category. Single parents are again treated more leniently, and sanctions are 3.61 percent lower than the vaguely

³⁷ Cf. for a similar assessment Naumann et al. 2019.

defined baseline category. When unemployed persons refuse to carry out unpaid community work “in exchange” for social transfers, sanctioning for younger benefit claimants is harsher (1.51 percent), and consequences for older unemployed persons are less abrasive (1.57 percent). Once more, the respondents tend to have more sympathy for single parents with a young child (4.66 percent). Heterogeneous country contexts for both scenarios are again associated with heterogeneous random intercepts, which reflect differences in the general propensity to impose sanctions from one country to another, and random slopes, which capture divergent consequences of the four vignette treatments at the country level.

In a nutshell, treatment vignettes that differ by age and thus allude to differences on the control and reciprocity dimensions exert long-lasting but substantively limited effects on attributed deservingness.³⁸ Family status, which taps the dimensions control and need, is undoubtedly more consequential, and these differences shed some light on the weighting of different dimensions of deservingness. Though, throughout the paper, the obtained treatment effects are consistently lower than expected and lower than reported in the previous literature.³⁹ However, we believe that this is at least partially a consequence of the selected vignettes: all benefit claimants are characterized in a complaisant manner and are described as individuals who have worked and contributed before but vary only in age and family status. However, the deservingness concept would also enable researchers (and, unfortunately, interested politicians) to paint a much more derogatory picture that characterizes individuals or whole groups of benefit claimants as alien, crooked, greedy, lazy, stupid or unqualified. We believe the effects associated with alternative vignettes to be way more significant and substantively consequential if these options were used.

In the next step, we advance from simple bivariate analyses of the RCT to more complex specifications that address the critical treatment effects and also consider alternative, independent variables and interactions of treatment effects with these controls. Our fundamental goal is to explore whether deservingness attributions are fast, automatic processes that apply to, in principle, all voters and all contexts or whether these effects are utilized as “heuristics” by subgroups of voters who lack the means and/or motivation to gather information and acquire informed knowledge rationally. Figure 4 presents three multilevel linear models, which include the three binary treatment indicators, a series of individual-specific controls, a random intercept to capture the difference in the baseline propensity to impose sanctions, and random slopes which model the contextual heterogeneity of treatment effects across diverse country contexts. Each

38 Cf. Naumann et al. 2019.

39 Buss 2019; Fossati 2018; Oorschot, Who Should Get What, 2000; Petersen et al. 2011.

model addresses the scenarios/situations S_1 , S_2 and S_3 , and comparisons across these three models enable us to check the robustness and stability of our findings.

Figure 4 reports coefficients and associated Bayesian confidence regions from fully specified, multivariate models. As before, these models have been run separately for each scenario S to allow for robustness checks. The obtained effect parameters illustrate that the primary treatment effects are maintained in direction and size when we include a wide range of controls. Turning to the individual-specific predictors, there is solid and robust evidence for the verisimilitude of arguments based on material self-interest. Across the board, interviewees who are currently unemployed, who have experienced unemployment before, or who indicate that they are subjectively afraid to be unemployed in the future are less likely to impose (harsher) sanctions.

The common and specific ideological predictors are also closely linked to the level of sanctions suggested by the respondents: The further to the right a respondent locates themselves, the more likely they are to suggest more severe sanctions in case of perceived non-compliance in all three scenarios. Turning to the more specific items, especially those who think that the provision of welfare state benefits makes people lazy or less willing to care for others are more likely to bring forward substantial sanctions. The same holds for those who believe that the provision of welfare sanctions produces undue burdens for the economy (although not necessarily for individual businesses). In contrast, there is only limited and partly contradictory evidence concerning the effects of positive attitudes to social welfare on the willingness to sanction non-compliant unemployed people. Whether respondents believe that social transfers help to build an equal society or effectively prevent widespread poverty is not systematically linked with the dependent variable across the three scenarios/the three models.

5 Summary, Conclusion, Perspectives

Attitudes to the welfare state, its specific programs, or specific people that are supposed to “benefit” from the implied social transfers have always been of vital interest for discussions in the public and political spheres. The dynamics of public opinion have been utilized by some to justify changes or cuts to social transfers and welfare spending, and they have been applied by others as a general tool for evaluating the justice and legitimacy of existing or proposed systems of social security.

The first task of this paper was to evaluate the explanatory force of two different strands of the literature on welfare states and public opinion. A series of more recent approaches has used deservingness cues heuristics to explore individual survey respondents’ attitudes to different groups of benefit claimants. These contributions often

exploit factorial surveys to gain additional causal traction. In line with these contributions, the vignette experiment implemented in Round 8 of the ESS demonstrates that respondents indeed react systematically to randomly assigned vignettes: older unemployed are more deserving than younger and are less likely to be sanctioned when they turn down job offers. In addition, family status also matters. Single parents without a job are still more likely to be considered deserving and, thus, less likely to be sanctioned in case of non-compliance.⁴⁰

Another strand of the literature has tried to attribute welfare state attitudes to the respondents' individual features. Relying on observational data derived from (comparative) survey projects, we find that items that assess material self-interest⁴¹, general and specific ideological features are closely linked to the willingness to attribute deservingness or to impose sanctions on allegedly non-compliant unemployed.⁴²

Secondly, this paper adds to the existing literature by adopting a systematic-comparative perspective. Up to now, contributions to the literature were usually confined to small sets of selected interviewees or to survey experiments within individual countries,⁴³ or pairwise comparisons.⁴⁴ This is the first factorial survey that can probe the hypothesized causal effects across twenty-three heterogeneous polities. While deservingness cues had significant causal value in all these contexts, our findings also demonstrate that it is conditional on economic, social, and institutional contexts.

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43 Buss 2019; Petersen et al. 2011.

44 Kootstra 2016; Petersen 2012.

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